

“Youth Ministry: A Balanced Approach” Notes Pages

Webinar Presented 10-8-14 by Eric Bliss

I) Introduction

This webinar has been constructed with the aim of giving youth ministry staff and volunteers tools to foster youth leadership, to help your youth groups explore Unitarian Universalism more deeply, and to nurture the soul of your adviser teams. Your presence is evidence that you are invested in the faith formation and spiritual and intellectual growth of the youth in your care. That is something to celebrate!

- Sustainable, balanced youth ministry is heart centered work.
- How can we honor the individual, giving them opportunities to explore leadership, while also being true to their developmental needs?
- How can we authentically partner with our youth to create organized learning, faith forming experiences that are ensured of success?
- How can we be sustained as mentors?

II) Fostering Leadership

There are many models for fostering youth spiritual growth.

Herein are approaches that have been particularly effective in supporting faith formation in teens. Other models exist. As UU's, we embrace pluralism and multiple avenues toward transformation.

One admitted bias woven throughout the program is that you have a team of folks working on behalf of your youth. If you do not have such a team, it's time to get one. You cannot do this alone. It is not good for you or for your youth. This is difficult work and it simply cannot be sustained by a single individual.

The essential driving question of this first section is: How does youth leadership form?

A) History

Liberal Religious Youth or LRY began in 1954. It was an autonomous youth organization affiliated with the American Unitarian Association. This entity was governed entirely by youth. Adults were involved only in an advisory capacity. There was drug use. Overt sexual activity. Back then youth often hitchhiked to Cons.

As a reaction to the many inflammatory incidents that occurred throughout the period, YRUU, or Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, formed in 1981. Its primary areas of focus were youth empowerment, social activism, and building youth leadership. If you'd like to learn more about this history, check out We Would Be One by Rebecca Scott and Wayne Arnanan.

In 2008, Rev Bill Sinkford commissioned the Youth Ministry Working Group to assess the UUA's continued support for youth programming nationally. Shortly thereafter continental YRUU was disbanded, but many districts and their Youth Adult Committees elected to continue with support of YRUU through district staff and in their congregations.

1) “Youth Gone Wild Years”

LRY was what I would term The Youth Gone Wild Years. Adults were basically absent with faith formation essentially occurring in a vacuum, if at all. The situation was one where participants were expecting ministry to happen without coaching, without structure, without safe policies.

2) "Empowerment Era"

The 80's brought about a revolution in youth ministry that I like to call the Empowerment Era.

It should be said that YRUU brought adults more clearly into the picture, and though they were present at youth gatherings and events many were unclear on their role and responsibility in the ministry to and with youth. Some simply were a "fly on the wall" (my youth adviser). Some completely ran the show.

Fortunately, many churches and the UUA itself began to form safe policies around youth gatherings and other congregational enterprises. At the same time, Religious Education in home congregations tended to focus on world religions. Many youth bridged without a sense of their own UU identity (myself included). In RE classes, youth were essentially responsible for their own faith formation. The phrase: "As UU's, we can believe whatever we want," was ubiquitous. And in some instances, still is.

B) "Fode's Story"

What is the role of adults in youth faith formation?

In 2002, I was the assistant coach for Highland High's varsity soccer team. Their head coach, Fode Doumbia, and I were debating how we should select captains for the team. Now I, being raised UU in the Empowerment Era, I stridently asserted that the youth should have complete say over who led them. It should be their decision to make.

Fode disagreed. He argued quite persuasively that night that we adults should have a say too. First, he talked about our role in identifying leadership qualities that go beyond popularity, attributes like compassion, responsibility, and level headedness. He also called attention to the curious condition in the U.S. of the decreasing value of a person's human worth as they age. "In Senegal," he stated "Elders are considered treasures because of their wealth of experience and insight." In the U.S., he contended it was the reverse. People lose worth as they age. We see this in the media most pervasively.

So what should an adult's role be in Youth Ministry?

C) Polarity Management

Polarity Management is a way of looking at competing interests.

One classic example of polarity management is democratic decision making versus executive decision making. Both approaches have value. Both approaches have limitations. Executive decisions are quick and efficient, but often lack buy in. Democratically made decisions usually take into account everyone's voice, but this process can be slow and messy. Institutions will regularly err on the side of one pole or extreme, for example making their institutional decisions entirely democratically. After a time, becoming disillusioned with this one avenue, the institution will let the pendulum swing to the opposite extreme of executive decision making, and after a time become frustrated anew. And the cycle commences, swinging from one end to the other.

The trick in Polarity Management is finding a balance between the two competing ends which acknowledges the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

So what does this have to do with youth ministry? I contend that it is the adult's role to balance youth empowerment and adult mentorship and guidance. Adults must strive to look for the sweet spot where youth and their older allies both have a voice in decision making.

D) The Cognitive Data

Without a doubt, youth should have a voice in all things that concern them.

At First Unitarian Denver, youth serve on the Board of Trustees, the newly designed Innovative Worship Group, and on the RE Team. Adults, must play an informed role in identifying and tapping into each youth's skill set and interests AND we must acknowledge the fact that youth developmentally are not in the same place that we are.

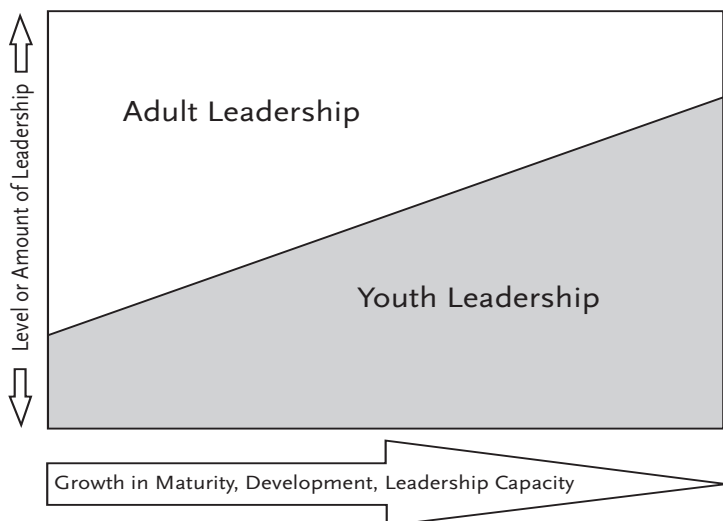
In the scientific journal essay: Current Theories of Risk and Rational Decision Making by Valeria Reyna and Susan Rivers from Cornell University, the authors explore the extensive research around youth brain development. Their conclusion, after much investigation, is that the adolescent brain is often not yet sufficiently formed to make completely rational decisions. For youth up to and around 20 years of age, their prefrontal cortex, which is linked with decision making, is still developing. In fact, the adolescent brain is designed to react rather than reflect and decide. This is referred to as Fuzzy Trace Theory.

Knowing this, should we adults simply take the reins and make all the decisions in our RE classes and spiritual enterprises? Absolutely not, but we also should not abandon the youth to decisions and responsibilities that they aren't yet capable to successfully navigate.

Adults have a critical role to play, starting with, at the minimum, ensuring that your youth group is following safe congregational policies. If you are curious about what these are: you can find them at www.uua.org/safe/

E) The Sweet Spot

Youth / Adult Shared Leadership



- This graph is called the Shared Leadership Spectrum
- -It was developed when the Youth Ministry Renaissance Module was revised in 2011.
- Along the vertical Y Axis is the Level or Amount of Leadership necessary for a given endeavor.
- Along the horizontal X Axis is the Growth in maturity, development, and leadership capacity of particular youth.
- Note that the graph illustrates that one way or another the Adults are always involved in the leadership and decision making process. As youth grow in maturity and responsibility the adult "presence" diminishes but never disappears entirely.

F) A Balanced Approach

So what does a balanced approach to youth empowerment look like outside of the theoretical? Take into account the cognitive data. Validate and affirm the adult's role in this important ministry. Emphasize training, support, communication, continuity, and accountability with and for our youth.

How does leadership form? Not in a vacuum, but instead with careful preparation and involvement by all the stakeholders.

- Ququest Camp is the Mountain Desert District Youth Camp that integrates adults, young adults, and youth into its leadership infrastructure. 25 and older Adults are a part of the leadership team which designs the camp programming, provides feedback and guidance during camp, and oversees the financial aspects of the project.
- Youth feedback from previous camps and informal interviews with youth leaders also contributes to programming selections.
- Young adults aged 19-24 are the Sr Counselors who lead programming, ensure continuity and flow, and who mentor youth Jr Counselors (Aged 16-18).
- Jr Counselors partner with Sr Counselors in all camp events and activities.
- Prior to beginning, all counselors are interviewed and assigned, with their own buy in and input, specific roles at camp based upon their gifts, talents, and interests (chaplain, crafts, field games, deans, touch group leaders, etc.) and they all attend a weekend long training to prepare them for the rigors of leading a camp.
- During Ququest, the youth and young adults lead practically everything, with the Leadership Team there to be consulted, checked in with, provide feedback, and when necessary, override when safety or covenant are being breached.

Want successful youth leaders? Adults and youth should have clearly defined roles, open lines of communication, accountability, and training which help them to tap into their individual skill sets.

III) Being Connective and Effective

- How do we make our Sunday morning Religious Education experiences successful?
- How can we be both effective at spiritual exploration and connective in the process?
- The revelatory UU minister, Rev Thandeka, insists that one cannot have a religious experience without a moment of pause. It is up to us as faith formers to help create and to empower the youth to fashion these moments of pause. These instances of transformation.
- To be able to create these moments, in order to be effective faith formers, our classes need organization. Stillness rarely arises from chaos.

A) Goal Setting

Part of being effective means knowing where you are going and why.

What are your group's Mission and vision? To answer these questions together can be the focus of a class, an overnight, or retreat. A Mission statement answers the question: [Why are you here?] Your Vision statement concerns: In the next 3-5 years, what specific, concrete goals do you have? This process doesn't have to be stodgy and formal. Play games. Write songs and poetry. Brainstorm. Make up a skit. Exploring your class' reason for being can be as engaging as any religious undertaking!

A possible youth group's mission statement is "Our youth group exists to grow souls in love and service in a fun and challenging environment." Why do we exist? To grow souls in love and service. And how should we do it? In fun and challenging ways!

Regarding vision, concrete goals for a youth group can be: we want to grow our youth group by 25%. We want to go on a mission trip. We want to attend GA. We want a dynamic, social event every month. Think big, be practical. Have fun with it!

Ultimately though, when it comes to goals, if you can't answer the question of why you exist, you have no reason to.

B) Structure

For efficacy's sake, I also recommend having the same structure for every class. This structure should absolutely get youth buy in.

Typical Class Structure

- Chalice Lighting (2 min)
- Centering Activity (1 min)
- Check in / Snack (10 min)
- Workshop / Activity (30 min)
- Discussion and Reflection Related to the Theme / UUism (5 - 10 min)
- Spiritual Practice (5 – 10 min)
- Closing Words (2 min) / Total = (65 min)

Some key points about this format:

Don't underestimate the power of food.

Overall, class activities should be engaging, tapping into the oral, visual, and kinesthetic learner. Create opportunities for the introvert with segments that encourage pair sharing or triads.

Spiritual practices should never be skipped. These are critical tools we are sharing with our youth for dealing with the rigors of living.

Planning, details, and logistics of various youth endeavors are for before or after class, not during. Youth group should not be bogged down with these details. Faith formation can't happen while planning a potluck or youth worship. Be creative. Communicate outside of class for these minutia.

When you model effective planning strategies and honor religious boundaries, you are fostering leadership development in your youth.

C) Covenant

This agreement informs who we are and how we are to be together. It's CONNECTIVE. It is a living document that can be altered throughout the church year. When individual break covenant, we strive to be gentle and to use restorative, rather than punitive, means with which to bring youth and adults back into covenant with one another.

Recommend that it be constructed on the 2-3rd class at the latest. A youth group's first class or two really must focus on icebreaking and teambuilding.

RE educators and UU ministers don't utilize covenant enough. Having behavior problem in class? Conflict over an issue? Thinking about taking the class in a new direction? Covenant is your guiding tool.

As the class moves forward into various projects, learning opportunities, and explorations your mission and vision statements and your covenant (hung proudly in class) can be constantly revisited when questions of direction arise.

IV) Exploring Unitarian Universalism

The Holy Trinity of Youth Ministry:

- Spiritual
- Social
- Faith in Action

To capture the hearts and mind of our youth, to be truly **connective**, the most successful classes incorporate these three integral components.

A) Spiritual

- Make every youth class, project, and endeavor a spiritual one.
- Begin by always lighting a chalice with inspirational words. Take a moment to center and reflect before the enterprise begins. Set an intention. "Why are we here today?"
- After your lesson, discussion, or activity, engage in a spiritual practice to reinforce the religious nature of the experience. This can be as easy as joining hands and popcorn-ing a word into the middle, or singing a song, or a short prayer or mediation.
- Mix up your spiritual practices. At First Unitarian, we divide them into mind, body, and soul practices.
- Rev Thandeka reminds us that for transcendence to occur we must pause. Help create those transcendent moments for and with your youth.

B) Social

Peer connections are extremely important for success in youth ministry. Ask any youth to rank their reasons for returning to church each week and the friendships and connections they make will top every list. Suggestions to help create lasting bonds between your youth members:

1) Name it. Say to them: We want youth group members to become close. To get to know one another, to share of themselves. In our COA program, we have a Diagram: Your comfort zone is written in a circle on one side of a flip chart page. Where the magic happens is written outside the circle surrounded by stars. In other words, challenge the youth to step outside their comfort levels in youth classes and be willing to be vulnerable. As the Rev Alicia Forde says, "We cross a threshold through a willingness to be vulnerable."

2) Incorporate icebreaking and team building exercises heavily in the first month of meetings. Sprinkle more of them throughout the year. Have weekly check-in's that aren't generic. Connect them to the theme of study, ex. Divinity.

3) Encourage Regional and Nation Event participation. Youth Cons, Leadership trainings, and multigen assemblies like GA are immersion experiences which bring participants together in life transforming ways allowing for intimacy and closeness to develop in relatively short time period.

4) Youth are busy doing stuff: sporting and musical events. Performances and milestones. Does your group go to these events together? Imagine how close a group could be if it supported each of its individuals in their pursuits outside of Sunday.

5) Constellation of Connections. According to youth ministry expert Mark DeVries, from Youth Ministry Architects, successful youth ministry means creating a constellation of connections for your youth.

- Are there easy avenues for youth to integrate into the mission and life of the congregation?
- Does your church have multiple (at least 2-3) multigenerational activities and / or worships monthly?
- How many different adults, youth, and young adults are present and active in the lives of your youth?

In Mark's research, the second most important connection that youth can make, determining whether they will remain in their denomination of birth, is with their MINISTER. This is based upon thousands of interest surveys of bridged youth and adults.

"The youth [must be] at the center of a web, a convergent community not only connected to them, but also to each other."

C) Faith in Action

As UU's our faith is grounded in service.

Does your youth group have a re-occurring social justice project or event?

What better way to be faithful than to have your group performing a regular faith in action project?

- Changes from year to year with the youth and adult's input.
- Ongoing.
- Best = A multigenerational project of the whole church that engages all the aged cohorts from children to elders, tapping into each cohorts strengths and abilities.

*Mission trips, Social Witness Events, Letter Writing, Canvassing, Advocacy, Community Engagement, etc.
Just make sure that your youth are involved.

Overheard a group of youth at our Fall Con this past weekend talking about how exhausted they were from school and homework. Their solution, "Let's do more service."

They recognized the energizing nature of social action done well.

At the end of every Faith in Action event, it is important to have intentional reflection with the youth group.

- How does this work ground us in our faith?
- How can we be better partners with our community?
- How was my soul fed?

Research shows that activist efforts can burn out individuals unless the work involves a self-reflective component.

D) Curriculum

Youth, by far, are the most sophisticated cohort in a Religious Education program in terms of their social and spiritual needs. They are developing self awareness and beginning to make life altering decisions. They crave variety, novelty, and are incredibly tech savvy. Youth are also under an incredible amount of pressure: from peers, parents, and from themselves.

So how do we create something inspiring and worthwhile, which fashions moments of stillness or pause, while also in a constantly new environment which incorporates technology and fresh information and insight and experiences?

SoUUI Surfing. Our YC calls it Neighboring Faiths on Monster Energy Drink!

- Start with monthly exploratory themes. Concepts like Divinity, Salvation, Brokenness, Mysticism, Generosity, etc.
- Next include your class format that we discussed earlier.
- Add in a first Sunday expedition outside of church. Hikes, museums, coffee shop, community center, etc.
- Sprinkle in a second Sunday guest speaker or multimedia experience (e.g. Ted Talk) related to the topic.
- On the third Sunday of the month, spend the class in conversation = the reflection session. Remember the importance of this process when doing social justice work?
- The final Sunday of the month the youth go to service and then meet afterward at a local eatery or coffee shop to process.

Example: October at FUSD. Our theme is scripture. Art museum field trip. Slam Nuba, slam poetry group is our guest speaker. 3rd Sunday Reflection Session. 4th Sunday Worship Visit. Youth and adults can work together to decide on all of the aforementioned!

V) Nurturing the Soul of the Adviser

To be successful here, our adults must be willing to be transformed by this work with youth. In Essex Conversations, Religious Education is exalted as a spiritual practice. Are our adults willing to invest personally and spiritually what it takes to make this work a religious experience? This means more than just showing up on Sunday morning!

A) Being a Team

1) Meeting regularly outside of Religious Education class—to plan, to align the class trajectory with mission and vision, to discuss class or individual youth issues, to reflect on the work, to problem solve and support one another.

2) Communicating regularly. Send out an email after each class with a summary of what occurred and what is next. These electronic messages, with appropriately moderated content, should go to the adviser team, associated staff, the youth, and parents, utilizing multiple avenues of communication: FB, email, twitter, text, etc.

Ask your stakeholders individually what forms of communication work best? The YC at FUSD regularly schedules meetings (using Doodle Poll) that are either formal, at church, or informal, in someone's home or at the local pub for touching base, gathering input, and checking in about our youth groups. She also sends out weekly electronic updates

to our MS and Sr High advising teams. In these missives there is a ton of info and also there is always a light hearted image of some cute cuddly animal or some other silly meme to liven up the message.

3) Teams have differentiated roles that emphasize the individual's strengths and interests. Advisers can be assigned as media techs, worship guides, faith in action leaders, social event planners—it's really up to the team. Once roles are assigned, make sure responsibilities and avenues of accountability are clear. Juan has this task. It is to be completed by X date.

4) UU Teams operate utilizing covenant. Make one together. Refer to it often. Be gentle when folks fall short of expectations. As mentioned previously, we emphasize using restorative methods to bring folks back into covenant.

B) Working Together

- We must commit to bringing in, training, and coaching talent. That's why we're here today. Once we have our trained, committed volunteers and staff, let's ensure that they are collaborating, supporting, encouraging, and having fun TOGETHER!
- When working together, if we separate out large projects into smaller tasks, it is much less stress inducing and easier to accomplish our goal. This commitment to efficiency supports team member satisfaction and makes our programs more harmonious.
- Example: In planning the upcoming youth worship focusing on generosity, interview the class to see where their interests are. Youth who play and love music are paired with an adult to pick out a list of musical selections, possibly performing them with our worship musician. Youth and Adults who love engaging ritual elements are charged with creating an activity or exercise for the service. And, participants who are inspired by written excerpts are responsible for call to worship, chalice lighting, and closing words. Etc.
- The adult team works with their youth and then collaborates cooperatively with one another to synthesize these various ideas and elements into a cohesive whole. All class projects can be broken down and executed in this fashion.

C) Make it Religious

Youth ministry is a religious calling. Details are essential to a program's success, but details aren't soul sustaining. Recommend that advisers, meet before AND after youth group, and in these gatherings take a moment for silent centering, for prayer, for meditation, to share a meal, to be outdoors—anything that grounds the spirit, focuses their intentions, and quiets the monkey mind.

Prior preparation for class is also important. Explore religious practices that connect to your content. Bring them to the youth group and to your team. Practice them regularly. That's why it's called practice!

Be authentic. Let the youth and your team members know who you are. This doesn't mean sharing war stories from days of yore, but it does mean being fully present and speaking kindly from our place of truth. "We cross a threshold through a willingness to be vulnerable." Through vulnerability and through stillness religious transformation is possible.

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Resources

- ⦿ Sustainable Youth Ministry by Mark DeVries
- ⦿ Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education by the Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee
- ⦿ Youth Ministry Working Group Report,
<http://www.uua.org/re/youth/know/workinggroup/index.shtml>
- ⦿ Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems by Barry Johnson
- ⦿ “Healing Community,” UUWorld by Thandeka
- ⦿ We Would Be One: The History of Unitarian Universalist Youth Movements by Wayne Arnasan and Rebecca Scott
- ⦿ Full Circle by Katie Tweedie (Covey)